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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL DEMOCRATIC LEFT PARTY TAKING AIM AT
FORMER POLITICAL PARTNER

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¶11. (SBU) Summary: Democratic Left Party (DSP) is targeting its former political partner -- the Republican People's Party (CHP) -- in the upcoming local elections, according to Mustafa Aslan, Istanbul Chair of the DSP. Despite an alliance that yielded 13 seats in Parliament for DSP, Aslan said an association with CHP and its leader Deniz Baykal does more harm than good to DSP. Aslan was also critical of those who highlight social problems, since it detracts from the core issue facing Turkey -- the economy. Aslan also blamed the press for claiming DSP is engaged in a bitter power struggle. End Summary.

Targeting CHP in the Local Elections

¶12. (SBU) Mustafa Aslan, Istanbul DSP Chair, explained to us the party's strategy targeting former political partner of convenience, CHP. While Aslan also talked about defeating the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the upcoming March local election, he said that DSP's immediate target is CHP. DSP needs to recruit a strong candidate to unseat the existing CHP mayor of Bakirkoy, Aslan said. Commenting on CHP's lack of grassroots support, he quipped, "there is no 'people' in the Republican People's Party".

¶13. (SBU) Aslan claimed partnering with CHP in the 2007 national election hurt DSP. While the partnership allowed 13 DSP members to enter parliament (reftel), DSP's connection with Baykal caused great harm to the party; Baykal's criticism of those benefitting from AKP's social programs lost votes for the DSP. The alliance with CHP gave the public the impression DSP was "anti-religion", when in fact DSP views religion as a personal choice and believes economic issues should be the government's primary focus.

It's the Economy, Stupid

¶14. (SBU) Aslan stressed that economic problems are the main issues facing Turkey today. High personal credit card debt, increasing inflation and joblessness are Turks' primary concerns. Aslan claimed only one percent of Turks care about lifting the headscarf ban in universities, yet AKP focused on this issue to distract voters from existing economic problems.

Leadership Fight is Exaggerated

¶ 15. (SBU) Aslan maintained a biased media is distorting accounts of a bitter power struggle between DSP Chairman Zeki Sezer and Rahsan Ecevit, wife of former Chairman and Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit. Aslan told us internal suggestions from Ecevit were inappropriately leaked and exaggerated to imply a power struggle. Aslan assured us Sezer remains the undisputed leader of the party.

Comment

¶ 16. (SBU) The Istanbul DSP branch strategy to focus on CHP strongholds in the local elections will likely divide the center-left vote, to the benefit of AKP. With DSP polling in the low single digits, its strategy will likely cause it to be a spoiler, and a weak one at that. The DSP fixation on defeating the CHP could cause it to be shut out in the local elections in Istanbul.

¶ 17. (SBU) Despite Aslan's claims, DSP appears to be facing a leadership struggle that also influences the future of the party. According to press accounts, Ecevit wants to replace Sezer with a centrist leader who could attract more voters on the right. However, with party rules stacked in Sezer's favor, he will likely remain at the helm of a marginalized DSP.

WIENER